

Treasure Island—the rise and decline of a small tropical museum, the Mauritius Institute

by Anthony S. Cheke

SUMMARY

In early nineteenth century Mauritius—the Indian Ocean island famous for the Dodo—Julien Desjardins and other local naturalists made collections of Mascarene biota, much of which is now extinct. This material formed the basis of a museum opened to the public in 1842. It was moved, together with a new public library, to the purpose-built Mauritius Institute in 1885. Throughout its first 140 years the collections, including many rare, unique and often irreplaceable specimens, were expanded and generally well looked after, until the early 1980s when cumulative underfunding and seriously inappropriate management led to a very disturbing deterioration of the collections, with specimens being lost and destroyed. Remedial action to stabilise what remains is technically simple but less straightforward socio-politically. As similar problems exist in many parts of the world, a 'Red List' of endangered collections should be compiled to provide a basis for prioritised action, and twinning museums at risk with well-endowed ones might also prove useful. [As the text was written in 1999, a postscript on recent remedial action to late 2002 is added.]

Introduction

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when museums were young and preservation techniques rudimentary, it was standard practice to throw out decayed specimens and replace them with new. Such a clear-out is popularly supposed to have taken place at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum in 1755, when the unique but decaying stuffed Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* is said to have been consigned, with other specimens, to be destroyed (MacGregor 1983). "By a lucky accident ... the head and one of the feet were saved from the flames" (Strickland & Melville 1848)¹.

We would not, however, expect this kind of thing to happen today, and yet I regret to say that the same story in fact applies to the recent history of the Mauritius Institute, the museum in the very land from which those Dodos came—one of the oldest museums in the Southern Hemisphere and one whose collections are literally, like the Dodos, irreplaceable.

Mauritius is an isolated volcanic island of some 1,865 km², situated in the Indian Ocean at 20°S, 840 km east of Madagascar. Together with Réunion (164 km south-west) and Rodrigues (574 km east), it forms part of the group known as the Mascarene Islands (Montaggioni & Nativel 1988, Strahm 1996), which although rather far-flung have a strongly coherent biota, and are famous for their distinct (and largely extinct) endemic fauna (Cheke 1987a,b, Quammen 1996). This highly endemic wildlife survived into historical times because the islands escaped the attentions of human colonists until the late sixteenth century.

The histories of Mauritian and Mascarene wildlife, ornithology and museums have been intertwined since the beginning. The very first public museum in Britain,

John Tradescant's 'Ark' in Lambeth (founded around 1630, and later absorbed into Elias Ashmole's museum in Oxford) contained what were then unusual objects of preservation, stuffed birds: among them was a Mauritian Dodo, one of a number to reach England in the 1620s/1630s (MacGregor 1983, Cheke 1987a). Its head and foot remain to this day the oldest surviving example of a bird skin. A specimen of an extinct Réunion tortoise was brought alive to Paris in 1671, and its carapace, the type of *Testudo indica*, survives there (Austin *et al.* 2002). Rodrigues, in 1690, was the scene of the first recorded account of territoriality in birds—Leguat's observations on the soon-to-be-extinct Solitaire *Pezophaps solitarius* (Armstrong 1953, Cheke 1987a). Birds from Réunion formed an important part of the *Cabinet du Roi* in Paris described by Brisson in 1760, and that decade also saw, on both Mauritius and Réunion, the first known example of biological control: Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* were introduced in 1767 to control locusts, and were given legal protection (another first) to ensure success (Cheke 1987a). French naturalists based on the islands corresponded with Buffon and others in Paris, and a number of scientific expeditions made collections in the 1700s and early 1800s (Cheke 1987a).

Origins of the natural history museum in Mauritius

By the early 1800s a number of naturalists were active in Mauritius and making collections. These included Charles Telfair, polymath, ex-ship's doctor, sometime Colonial Secretary for the island and sugar planter (Michel 1935), who had the ear of the new British administration. His own material, given to the Zoological Society of London, was dispersed and largely lost when the Society's collections were sold in 1855 (Wheeler 1997). In 1826 Telfair prompted two local collectors, zoologist Julien Desjardins and botanist Louis Bouton, to offer their material to the state, in the form of the British Governor Sir Lowry Cole, to form the core of a proposed 'colonial museum'. This generous offer met with no response from the Governor, however, so in 1829 Telfair invited Bouton, Desjardins and other local naturalists, notably botanist/explorer Wenceslas Bojer and seafaring zoophile François Liénard (all names very familiar to anyone who knows the Mascarene lizard fauna), to a meeting at which the Société d'Histoire Naturelle de l'Île Maurice was founded (Ly-Tio-Fane 1972). Desjardins, who had meanwhile set up a museum privately in his own house on his estate at Argy (Flacq district; Bouton 1877), went to Paris in 1839 to write a natural history of the island, but died there prematurely in 1840. His widow, determined that the collection should remain in Mauritius to honour her husband's dedication, presented his collections to the Society (Bouton 1842). Bouton added his plants, and together with Adrien d'Épinay's library (also recently left to the Society), the ensemble was finally opened to the public in 1842 as the Muséum Desjardins, in a wing of the Royal College in Port Louis, with Bojer as curator (Pike 1873, Ly-Tio-Fane 1972). This time the government provided the space and also half of the salary of the curator and his taxidermist (Ly-Tio-Fane 1972). Bouton (1851) reported that 4,278 people visited the museum in its first five years; at the time only some 10,000 of the island's population (the white ruling class and some of

the creoles: Toussaint 1972) would have been allowed access to the Royal College and had sufficient education to be interested in a museum.

Visitors from abroad often commented on the collection. Mouat (1852) called it an 'excellent museum ... worthy of his [Bojer's] great and widely established reputation'. By contrast in 1862, Edward Newton, colonial official and ornithologist, wrote disparagingly to his brother Alfred (soon to be professor of zoology at Cambridge) that 'it is quite disheartening [to have] anything to do with the museum, there is not a soul who cares or knows about ornithology in the island, though perhaps some of them would be most offended at my saying so' (MS letter book in the Alfred Newton papers, Cambridge University Library). Although Newton was later president of the Society in the 1870s (*Trans. Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius, passim*), he never contributed any collections to the museum. Nicholas Pike (1973), American consul, naturalist and raconteur, was more upbeat: 'The natural history collections of the Society in their museum are fine and rare, but not extensive. Besides the fauna of Mauritius, that of Madagascar, southern Africa and the neighbouring islands is well represented.'

Despite the initial goodwill, the new museum was seriously underfunded. Bojer died discouraged in 1856; the indefatigable Bouton took over, but it was not until 1863, with the arrival of Sir Humphry Barkly as Governor, that things began to improve (Bouton 1877). Finally, in 1877, Governor Sir Arthur Phayre made proposals for a purpose-built museum, and accepted a report from the Society (by now the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius [RSAS]) recommending that a new institution be set up to comprise the museum and a public library, and to have in addition a dedicated educational function (RSAS 1878), to be fully funded by the government. Ordinance No.19 of 1880 (see *Mauritius Almanac* for 1881) provided for 'the erection, establishment and regulation of a Mauritius Institute, a Public Museum and Public Library' to promote 'the general study and cultivation of the various branches and departments of arts, science, literature and philosophy, and for the instruction and recreation of the people'. The Governor was authorised in the Ordinance to vote funds to 'erect within the town of Port Louis a building' to house the Institute; the result was the construction of a fine new edifice in a very prominent central site in the capital, which was bought and cleared of existing buildings (Macmillan 1914). Work began promptly, and the new Mauritius Institute was formally opened (two governors later) in December 1884 for a colonial exhibition, with the museum and library moving there in January 1885 (Daruty 1885, Koenig 1939, Ly-Tio-Fane 1979). They are in the same building today, although the Institute now also controls two other smaller museums containing historical, artistic and other material (Tirvengadam 1980).

The importance of the collections

One might imagine that a small museum in a small country would contain little of international importance, but with the Mauritius Institute this is very far from the case. I do not propose to list all its treasures, and indeed I do not know what unique

invertebrates it may still contain, but any *one* of the following would justify a special place on a world level of collections. The museum contains (Cheke & Jones 1987, Cowles 1987, Staub 1993) the only extant skeletons of the large extinct flightless rail *Aphanapteryx bonasia* and the extinct giant skink *Leiopisma* (= *Didosaurus*) *mauritiana*; one (the last individual ever recorded) of only three specimens of the extinct endemic Pigeon Hollandais *Alectroenas nitidissima*; a Réunion Starling *Fregilupus varius* (extinct and one of only 18 or so surviving specimens); one of the very few specimens of the probably extinct monotypic endemic burrowing boa *Bolyeria multicarinata* from Round Island; two good Dodo skeletons (including the only one articulated solely from a single individual) and a general collection of extant endemic vertebrate fauna which is not particularly well represented in any other museum. The pigeon and starling come from Desjardins's original collection; one Dodo from Théodore Sauzier's excavations in 1891–1892; the other, with the rail and the skink, from Mauritian barber Etienne Thirioux's spare-time excavations around the turn of the century and first exhibited in 1903 (d'Emmerez de Charmoy 1903, Koenig 1939).

The birds held in the museum were enumerated by Rountree *et al.* (1952) and again (data collected 1974–1983) by Cheke & Jones (1987); it would be interesting to repeat the census today. In addition there are extensive collections of insects, marine invertebrates and fish, although the highly endemic land-snail fauna, of which many representatives are already extinct (Griffiths 1997), is under-represented (pers. obs.). The herbarium (originally Bouton's) was removed to Pamplemousses Gardens in 1868—where it was disastrously curated and almost ruined in 1899 when thrown into rat-infested outhouses to make way for a temporary isolation hospital—and only returned to the Institute in the mid-1930s after having been rescued and sorted by Reginald Vaughan (Vaughan 1969). In 1960 it was combined with two other collections as the Mauritius Herbarium, under Vaughan as curator, and installed in air-conditioned premises at the Mauritius Sugar Industry Research Institute (MSIRI) at Le Réduit (Vaughan 1969).

Recent history of the Mauritius Institute

When first established in the 1880s the museum was under a Board of Directors with quasi-independent status under the Colonial Secretary. In 1929 a proposal by the Board to become a formal Government Department (Ingrams *et al.* 1929) was not acted on, though the public displays were re-worked (Koenig 1939). In 1940 a new ordinance restructured the Board and its functions (Michel 1980). However, in 1957 the museum was attached to the Ministry of Education and Culture, and in 1967, the year before Mauritius became independent, a Public Service Commission was established which relieved the board of its ability to choose staff (Michel 1980, Tirvengadam 1980). Apart from a hiatus from 1913 to 1941 during which W. E. Hart, followed by his son the poet Robert Edward Hart (literary figures without any knowledge of natural history) were in charge (Tirvengadam 1980), the curatorship has always been given to a notable local biologist or naturalist (who also oversaw

the library). Nonetheless, during the Harts' curatorship, local naturalists were very actively involved in the running of the natural history collections (Ingrams 1929, Koenig 1939). In 1946, following the 1940 ordinance, the new senior post of director was established, under whom served the curator and a librarian. The first incumbent was Dr Reginald Vaughan, founder of plant ecological studies in Mauritius, followed by Jean Vinson, an entomologist and herpetologist who did much to draw attention to the uniqueness of and threats to Round Island, and then by marine biologist Claude Michel, who has devoted a lifetime to science education in Mauritius. Unfortunately when Claude Michel, already curator, succeeded to the directorship, it then took the Public Service Commission 12 years to appoint a new curator! (Michel 1980).

On the occasion of the Institute's centenary in 1980 the then director, botanist Deva D. Tirvengadam, reminded fellow Mauritians that one of the Institute's functions was 'the preservation, enrichment and systematic study of all its precious collections', and that the 'functions of conservation, research and education are tied to the good curation of collections'. He continued prophetically: '...the essential task is to protect the collections from all forms of deterioration and the various attacks from *men* or the elements to which they could be victim' (Tirvengadam 1980; my translation and italics). Emphasising the need to understand the real value of the collections, he complained that the staffing was 'primordial', and that it was essential to restructure the concept of museums in Mauritius, have proper technical consultative back-up, and apply for funds from UNESCO and other international bodies.

Tirvengadam's article was an outburst from a discouraged successor to Bojer; he left shortly afterwards for pastures abroad, his clear call for remedial restructuring ignored. The dire result of depriving the Board of Directors of appointing powers was then made all too evident with the failure of the Public Service Commission to find and appoint a new director. The then curator, R. Gajeelee, a zoology graduate but without training in museum or library management, was left in charge as acting director, a position he continued to occupy for nearly 20 years.

In 1982, faced with deteriorating conditions and losses of priceless books, the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius, which had been so instrumental in founding the Institute, removed its library to new secure air-conditioned premises adjacent to the Herbarium, provided by the MSIRI (RSAS 1983). I visited the Institute in 1985 to consult a manuscript and was struck by the disarray in its archival collection. By the time of my next visit in 1996, some major improvements had been made in parts of the public display area and one of Andrew Kitchener's thin Dodo models acquired. However, stories from local naturalists alleged that the museum's reserve collections were being totally neglected, and that specimens of rare endemic species were being thrown away because they were supposedly 'moth-eaten'. The *Mauritius Institute Bulletin*, a reputable vehicle for local faunal and biological studies since 1937, edited by the director, had not appeared since 1984; Gajeelee had published only one issue. In 1997 and 1998 two senior visiting British museum curators confirmed the lamentable conditions. One reported to me that

museum staff proposed to throw away an alcohol specimen of the extinct endemic snake *Bolyeria multicarinata* (one of about 6 in the world) because the head broke off when the brittle specimen was removed from its bottle. Clearly the museum had lost curatorial perspective.

This situation has had direct and negative repercussions for Mauritian science. Since 1973 there has been a pro-active international wildlife conservation project in place on the island (Jones & Hartley 1995), coinciding with the beginning with the British Ornithologists' Union Mascarene Islands Expedition (Diamond 1987). Initially there was active collaboration with the museum (pers. obs. 1973–1975, C. G. Jones pers. comm.) but during Gajeelee's tenure, the project, currently under the umbrella of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, became increasingly wary of involvement with the museum, and took to sending all valuable specimens abroad. Such specimens, and those deriving from captive-breeding projects at Jersey Zoo, still technically belong to the Mauritius Government (Cooper *et al.* 1998). Meanwhile, in total contrast, the now properly curated Mauritius Herbarium, under the auspices of the MSIRI, thrives, and has played a pivotal part in the compilation of a major new Mascarenes flora, the *Flore des Mascareignes* (Bossier *et al.* 1976–), in collaboration with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in the U.K. and ORSTOM in France. No equivalent faunal collaboration would be possible under recently prevailing conditions, whereas in neighbouring Réunion the equivalent (and almost equally valuable) Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle under Sonia Ribes and [in 1999] Mathieu Le Corre is actively involved in projects with overseas institutions.

I returned to Mauritius in early June 1999 to work on a book project with a colleague. We went with some trepidation to the museum, only to discover that the acting director had died in post a fortnight earlier; he had allegedly been physically and mentally unfit for some years, but had nonetheless been allowed to remain in office. The Commission moved quickly to appoint a successor, S. Abdoolrahaman, who was thought to be in line for the permanent job. In my conversations with him in June 1999 it was clear that he was fully aware of the museum's plight and well disposed to receiving foreign aid to help get the museum back on its feet.

The museum in Réunion has been recently renovated (1995–1996), exploiting regional assistance money available in Paris for such projects (pers. obs. 1973–1999; S. Ribes pers. comm.). This is of course easier in an overseas *département* of France than for independent Mauritius, but it provides a model for what could be done in the Mauritius Institute. I have no doubt that funds for such a project could be found in the EC, UNESCO or the Commonwealth—the only stumbling block being that the request for the aid must come from the Mauritius Government. In fact, Mauritius did commission the University of Texas to report on the future of the museum in around 1996 (S. Abdoolrahaman, pers. comm., June 1999), but the recommendations have been neither disclosed nor implemented. A French-funded consultant, Emmanuel Richon, has been working with the Mauritius Institute's three museums for the last two or three years reorganising the public displays in a more 'modern' idiom; at the time of writing [November 1999] he had not reached the

natural history section, although he has been instrumental in getting the main building re-roofed (it had been leaking for years). However, his brief was with educational displays, and he did not have much to do with the reserve collections.

Constraints and solutions

Many people in Mauritius were long aware of the problem with the museum, but felt unable to act. One reason is its system of governance, since the lack of executive power placed the Board of Directors, however well-intentioned, in an impossible situation. It is also the case that, as in many other parts of the world, those working with or in government are reluctant to jeopardise their projects or jobs by raising the issue of the museum, however bad they may personally feel about it. Moreover, there is an understandable cultural difficulty resulting from the numerical and political dominance of a community originating from immigrants from India. Many feel stronger historical ties to the subcontinent than to the European colonial history of an island whose endemic fauna and flora was largely destroyed by western colonists long before the period of Indian immigration began (1830s: Toussaint 1972, Addison & Hazareesingh 1993). Recent governments have given higher priority to a museum and institute commemorating Mahatma Gandhi, though he only visited the island once, briefly, in 1901 (Addison & Hazareesingh 1993). Low official interest in the lost native biota may also be unconsciously related to the fact that average Mauritians (of whatever ethnic origin) see so little of it in their daily lives. Every familiar flower, tree, snail, insect, mammal or bird—bar a few butterflies, one bird and a couple of bats and palms—is an exotic, and has been since their great-great-grandparents' lifetimes. What they think of as typically Mauritian plants and animals are the everyday tropical species they meet in their gardens and countryside, whereas the endemics seen in the museum are as foreign to them as kangaroos or ostriches.

Is the museum more important to Westerners than it is to Mauritians? The West should perhaps overtly acknowledge its central role in the destruction of Mauritian wildlife, and its enduring interest in preserving the lost remnants of that biota in the museum. The natural history museum in Mauritius is in essence a European cultural and historical legacy, and perhaps it lies with Westerners to help maintain it, as has already been implicitly accepted in the international conservation programmes devoted to protecting the surviving native wildlife. In reality, of course, there are many Mauritians who fully understand and support the museum, and some sort of partnership must therefore be possible. Perhaps a way forward might be for the concerned museum fraternity to compile a kind of 'Red List' of underfunded and endangered museums and collections. It should be emphasised that these are by no means all in developing countries— in seeking an old Mauritian specimen I well recall the dismal plight of the Hancock Museum in Newcastle, U.K., in the 1970s² (see also Jessop 1999). This list could then be used to *offer* assistance to places housing such collections, in much the same way as wildlife conservation projects are often initiated and run. 'Twinning' a well-appointed museum with a less favoured

one, as is often done between towns, might also provide benefits and a useful interchange of personnel and ideas.

Postscript, October 2002

With minor adjustments, the above account remains more or less as it was written in 1999, as trying to update it within the text would have resulted in a loss of the immediacy that formed an important part of its message when given as a talk at the conference. However, things have moved on, and the following postscript brings the situation up to date, bearing out the more optimistic outlook immediately evident following the appointment of Mr Abdoolrahaman.

Following the leak of a draft of this paper to the Mauritian press in May 2000, prompting a critical article by Marylène François in *Weekend* on 4 June, the Acting Director wrote me a pained letter asking for specific details, which I supplied. This exchange triggered, or at least accelerated, action to rectify the 20 years of dereliction. The Netherlands was already funding archaeological work under Dr Peter Floore on seventeenth-century Dutch settlement sites; bird and mammal bones were turning up in their middens, and it was a natural extension to look towards the subfossil bones kept in the Port Louis museum. At Mr Abdoolrahaman's invitation, the project funded Julian Hume of the U.K. Natural History Museum (Tring), who was already working on the Dutch bird bones, and was the colleague who had visited the museum with me in 1999, to make a rapid survey in June 2001 of the reserve collections to assess their status and make recommendations for their proper curation. Hume's brief report (Hume 2001) reveals that while some of the missing items (e.g. bird skeletons) had simply been hidden in an inaccessible attic, other specimens were indeed in a deplorable state: butterflies and some mounted skins were ruined by damp and pests, and the spirit collection, containing much lizard type material (Vinson & Vinson 1969, Cheke 1975), had completely dried out. Some progress had already been made in rescuing skin and insect specimens and treating them with insecticide. There was no time then to make an inventory (so allegedly missing bird skins were not checked), but a Dutch member of Dr Floore's team is currently at work in the museum (J. Hume pers. comm.), and hopefully the new enthusiasm and international collaboration will result in the restoration of the museum's reputation and its central place in Mauritian biology.

It has also recently been announced (Maureemootoo 2002) that the *Mauritius Institute Bulletin* is to be re-launched in early 2003, reviving after nearly 20 years' absence this important local vehicle for faunistic and floristic studies.

Footnotes

1. Although widely disseminated and believed this story is not actually true. Ovenell (1992) has documented through archival records the real version, in which new curator William Huddesford was doing his duty in preserving what could be preserved of deteriorating specimens, in the Dodo's case the head and foot; effective preservation techniques had yet to be discovered. There was no fire—this was a colourful invention of Strickland's. In the early 1700s there were two other stuffed

Dodos in Oxford, in the Anatomy School (MacGregor 1983)—these did indeed disappear without trace (A. V. Simcock, pers. comm.).

2. Marmaduke Tunstall, whose collections formed the basis of the Hancock Museum, had a live Mauritius Fody *Foudia rubra* in his aviaries in the mid-1700s, later preserved as a mounted specimen, when it was illustrated by Peter Brown (1776). The skin was there in 1827 (Fox 1827), but had long vanished (together with most of the rest of Tunstall's birds) by 1977 when I looked for it. To bring this insectivorous bird alive to England at the time was a remarkable feat—it was the first Mauritian passerine to reach Europe.

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